

ADVANCED WRITING WORKSHOP

THE GREATER BARRIER

Among the practitioners of the Intelligence Arts there are few who will be surprised when the mechanical translation of languages leaves the laboratory and becomes operational. Indeed, this breakthrough of the foreign language barrier is so close upon us that some of our forward-looking administrative assistants should be working now on appropriate staff studies -- "The Redistribution of No-Longer-Necessary Personnel," for example.

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze the vast intelligence implications of the availability of mechanical translation, but one cannot contemplate the subject even in passing without catching a glimpse of the inevitable extrapolation of its techniques as it progresses from bulky machines and visual translation to pocket-size portables and instantaneous audible translation. The foreign language barrier, once breached, will be utterly shattered; foreign language competence will become largely academic and archival, and the foreign language specialist will join the buggy whip and the piston-driven aircraft engine as a relic of yesteryear.

There are, of course, those cynics who doubt the operational practicability of mechanical translation. One of them recently published a probably spurious account of a laboratory performance of the translation mechanism. According to the story, the laboratory scientist had selected for the trial run -- to take its place in history alongside "What hath God wrought?" and "Come here, Watson, I want you" -- the sentence, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The machine, the source reports, hummed for a few seconds and produced a foreign language statement to the effect that "the liquor is agreeable, but the meat is insipid."

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We scarcely need remind these doubting Thomases of all the great new ideas at which their spiritual ancestors laughed. Mechanical translation will come. The handwriting is on the wall -- and it matters not in what language.

Perhaps, then, the time is upon us when we should face and begin to penetrate a barrier even greater than that of foreign languages -- the English language barrier.

The perceptive listener will have noted the duality of our verb -- "face and begin to penetrate." The implication is, and is intended to be, that we have a dual mission: we must first face the English language barrier before we can begin to penetrate it. For it is in facing it and recognizing that it does, in truth, exist that we become conscious of how formidable this Barrier is.

Our first reaction to the proposition that the English language is an imperfect tool of communication is one of tolerant dismissal of the preposterous. We point to the vast treasury of literature in the language. We mention a few of the great masters -- Chaucer, Shakespeare, Conrad, O'Neill, Wolfe, Spillane. We may even quote a sentence or two to demonstrate the capability of the language to convey great meaning with few words -- "The time is out of joint," for example. And this reaction would be quite proper if we were discussing the English language as an instrument of evocation. It is indeed an evocative language. Only music, perhaps, has greater powers of empathy. But how good is the language as a precision tool in communication? How well does it do the job that is the basic one in the intelligence business -- the ordering, reporting, analyzing, and interpreting of information?

To provide an oversimplified illustration of the problem, let us meet ourselves on our own ground. The reporter who ascribed the lament that "the time is out of joint" to a certain source also ascribed to him the admonition -- addressed to an attractive young lady -- to "get thee to a nunnery." Now most readers would interpret that exhortation as the compassionate solicitude of a sensitive young man, acutely aware of the out-of-jointness of the times, the rottenness of his environment, and the duplicity of humankind, for the welfare of his beloved, anxious that she seek sanctuary in some unsullied cloister. The student of Elizabethan semantics, however, knows that in the language of the day the word "nunnery" was commonly used to refer to a bawdy house and the young man was in effect telling the young lady to go jump in the lake -- a piece of advice which, you will remember, she took.

We shall not belabor the point. Let us accept for the moment an at least eminently defensible proposition: in the English language it is extremely difficult to use words in contextual sequence which mean to all people precisely what the user intended them to mean; it is extremely difficult to use the language so that it cannot be misunderstood; the language, therefore, is an imperfect tool of expression and constitutes a Barrier to communication.

Granting the existence of the Barrier, we may be inclined to dismiss it as one of life's inevitabilities -- like death, taxes, and power lawnmowers. These things we have always with us; we get along with them as best we can, and it is folly to fight them. Now this attitude of resigned complacency may be acceptable in most walks of life. It may be a firm enough foundation on which to base the equanimity that satisfies most of us as a substitute for a real coming-to-terms with life. But is it acceptable in the intelligence business? Can we admit the existence of the Barrier and then do nothing about it? Consider for a moment just a few phases of our business in which we bruise ourselves against the Barrier.

Take first the most critical end-product of intelligence, its predictive conclusions. By the very nature of their subject-matter these conclusions must be qualified ones; they are guesses supported in varying degrees by information of varying accuracy supplied by sources of varying reliability. And the guesses themselves are made by men of varying perceptivity. In lieu of more explicit language, we call these guesses "estimates." Estimates of future situations are useful only when coupled with indications of the degree of certainty attached to their predictions, and this predictive certainty is expressed in qualifiers. It follows, then, that an estimate is useful only to the extent that it is precisely qualified.

Now, what tools do we have to work with to make these precise qualifications? Well, we have the words "probable," "possible," "likely," "certain," and their antonymic forms; we may qualify these qualifiers with the words "very," "slightly," "surely," "almost," "highly"; we have the phrases "it is believed that," "it is concluded that," "the available evidence indicates that," and a dozen others. These, then, are the tools; and considering the importance of the job that has to be done with them, they are very dull tools indeed.

For example, let us consider "possible" and "probable." Our estimate is to the effect that "it is possible that A (a substantive element) will B (a predicative element)" or that "it is probable that A will B." Just how much information has been communicated? Practically anything is possible; and how probable is probable? In order to make these expressions meaningful, we have to set up a mathematical scale of possibility-probability: possible means less than a 50-50 likelihood that A will B, and probable means more than a 50-50 likelihood that A will B. By the addition of the qualifying words that qualify the qualifiers -- barely, slightly, highly, certainly -- and the assignment of values to these, we can calibrate our scale down, perhaps, to units of tens. But thus we have left the realm of language and sought succor in mathematics in order to arrive at the crudest kind of precision.

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Now let us consider "the available evidence indicates that ...". Often the only honest thing an intelligence analyst can say about an estimate. Even though his statement is buttressed by meticulous documentation, his communication has been approximate rather than precise. Like the history pupil's generalization that "Queen Elizabeth was the Virgin Queen of England; as a Queen she was a great success," the analyst's statement contains implications of inadequacy. The word "available" suggests, of course, that probably there is a large body of evidence not available, evidence that may or may not "indicate that ...". The word "indicates" may have a flavor of certainty, like "shows," or carry an odor of doubt, like "suggests." In short, the limitations of the language prevent the analyst from communicating that fine balance of scholarly honesty and intuitive conviction which underlies the estimate.

Now we still might plead for tolerance of the Barrier on the grounds that the estimative phase of intelligence is inherently precarious, that no tool of communication could be devised which would probe the shadowy recesses that lurk behind the intelligence estimate, that perhaps it is better left imprecise. But such a plea is stilled by even a cursory glance at the language in action in virtually any other phase of our business.

Consider the fitness report. The Barrier is so formidable here that again we have been forced to seek the aid of mathematics. And even with digital assistance we cannot avoid inadvertent damnation or beatification. Consider chain-of-command memoranda. An Assistant Director informed a Division Chief that he was "forwarding the following papers ... which may render themselves to the fulfillment of the concept described in the referenced memorandum" -- not only a lofty flight against the Barrier but a resounding proclamation of its existence. Consider the compounding of confusion that is the inevitable result of any attempt to define and use the word "capability," an attempt that must always end with Humpty Dumpty's assertion that "it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less."

Having established the existence of the Barrier and having -- reluctantly, perhaps -- admitted that something should be done about it, the next phase of our mission should be doing something about it. But let us not be hasty. Let us not attack so formidable a foe without careful reconnaissance. The actual penetration of the Barrier is a massive task; an impetuous frontal attack might lead us into the familiar fatuousness of the Carnegians, who simply obscure the Barrier with a cloud of sound swirled about by calisthenic agitation, or into the folly of the plain-words, plain-letters pedants, who counsel blindness to the Barrier and restriction to the parochial borders of our current verbal competence.

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Our first cautious step in reconnaissance might be the determination of the point at which the Barrier should be attacked. In the intelligence business the major medium of communication is written English. Oral communication is important, of course, but it is definitely a secondary medium, and virtually every oral communication emerges from, passes through, or enters into written form. Oral communication, moreover, is not language alone. It is language supported by the substantial crutch of audio-visual aids -- aids that range from the rising inflection and the raised eyebrow to the blackboard and the animated flow chart. It is in written communication that we must rely wholly upon the language; it is here that the inadequacy of the tool is most apparent; it is here that the Barrier must be attacked.

Now perhaps the next step in our reconnaissance is an appraisal -- agonizing, if you like the cliché -- of some of the factors in our past failures to achieve a breakthrough. Obviously there are a host of these factors, and within the scope of this paper we can do little more than identify some of the major ones.

First of all, certainly, is the factor of self-exculpation. Those of us who admit and lament the inadequacy of written English are confident that we are not the ones for whom the ball rolls. Our defenses are manifold -- and manifestly shallow. We are well educated, we say, with our tendency to equate writing ability and education. Actually, there is little relationship between them. One can -- and many do -- acquire two or three academic degrees without ever having mastered even the rudiments of effective written language communication. Some of us base our defense on pragmatism: we have got along in life quite well with our ability to write; therefore that ability must be of a rather high order. With equal logic we could claim competence in electronics on the basis of having used radios successfully. Individually, of course, we have different degrees of culpability, but there is a difference in degree only. None of us is without sin.

A second significant factor is the Literary Bent. Most of us, when we put pencil to paper or fingers to typewriter, are infused with the compulsion to create literature -- to relegate communication to a secondary role and to feature the elegant phrase and the meaningful metaphor. In its mildest manifestation the Literary Bent makes us write "inception" when we mean "beginning," "terminal" when we mean "last," and "penultimate" when we mean "next-to-last." As the Bent becomes stronger, instead of "joining," "finishing," and "separating" things, we "marry," "consummate," and "divorce" them; the Freudian overtones no doubt lend sophistication to the language. In its most purulent form the Literary Bent leads us into juicy phrases such as these, which prosaic editors have culled from the finished drafts of intelligence reports:

Gone were the halcyon days of loose talk about the mighty upsurge in the output of consumer goods
The veil of secrecy is so thickly meshed in the Iron Curtain
The New Lands was a virgin area pregnant with possibilities for development.

Still another factor is the vaunted Viability of our language -- its ability to grow, to change, to adjust itself to the needs of the times, to cast off the grammarian's chains and take flight into new spheres. This Viability, incidentally, has been rediscovered with tiresome regularity by bright young university instructors who write Sunday Supplement articles which advise us that we should not hesitate to judiciously split an infinitive should we choose to and that a preposition is not a bad thing to end a sentence with and that there is no real need to end a sentence anyway until we have said everything that seems to be related to the idea that we are concerned with.

Now this linguistic chameleonism is all very well when we are concerned with the evocative power of the language, but it wreaks havoc with communication. We hold no brief for slavish conformity to the dicta of the grammarians; we split infinitives at times, we end some sentences with prepositions, and we begin some sentences with coordinating conjunctions. But we feel that unilateral and indiscriminate departure from accepted patterns defeats the purpose of language. Too often the relationship between writer and reader becomes a game of "what's my meaning?" A decade or two ago the word "since" meant since and the word "while" meant while; now, "since" may mean either since or because and "while" may mean either while or although -- depending on the writer's intention, an intention often determined only by a brisk deciphering exercise. Examples of this take-your-choice kind of diction are literally legion (the word "literally" here means literally, not figuratively) and the language game has just about reached the point at which the writer should provide parenthetical guidance -- "Since (meaning because) the ore body lies under (meaning beneath) over (meaning more than) 160 feet of overburden (in this term, over means above [meaning on top of (referring to position in space)]) and is under (meaning less than) 6 percent metallic content, it is not too (meaning very) profitable to exploit."

Self-exculpation, the Literary Bent, and the Viability of the language are a few of the many factors that adversely affect our capability to penetrate the Barrier. The reconnaissance should be exhaustive, and it must be if we are to begin our attack with any degree of confidence in the outcome.

It is at this point, perhaps, that the strategist should retire and leave the field to the tactician. And surely, with the very life of the intelligence business at stake, the tactician who has plotted the destruction of the foreign language barrier will rise to this greater challenge posed by the English language.